Taking a seat at the table; How I went from being a high school student to a corporate VP in a day

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Byline: Ryann Fineberg Contributor Is A High School Student In Toronto. Ryann Fineberg

Body

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez famously said justice is about "making sure that being polite is not the same thing as being quiet. In fact, often, the most righteous thing you can do is shake the table."

As young women and girls, sometimes we don't even have the opportunity to have a seat at that table. So I knew I had to "shake things up" when I learned that applications were open for a girls' leadership program called Girls Belong Here.

Girls Belong Here is a long-standing program run by Plan International Canada that creates space for young women to demonstrate that we belong wherever we aspire to be. This is accomplished by leaders in high-profile positions sharing their seats with young leaders and giving us the platform to step up and share our stories, insights and solutions.

Upon my acceptance, I was selected to step into the role of Hilary Lloyd, The Body Shop's North American VP of marketing and activism, due to my own work in animal and climate activism. I was ecstatic to begin working with her and her team to offer my unique perspective to their business, but I knew it wasn't a one-way street. I was expecting to have a look into the career journeys of my leaders, as well as gain insight into the issues that I am passionate about. Looking back, I certainly accomplished those goals, but what I gained from this experience was even more profound.

As youth, we are a big part of the future, so we must play a big role in shaping it. That means we have access to meaningful opportunities to share our solutions and perspectives in a space where they will be considered and carried out. But that's not happening - in fact, we have very little say in policies on issues that will impact us the most. This needs to change, which is precisely why experiences like Girls Belong Here are needed.

During my several calls with Hilary and her team, I witnessed firsthand the value they placed in what we program participants had to say. They listened to our concerns, and wanted to develop ways to address them as a business. This makes me believe that we can create a world where more youth are involved in decision-making, if more organizations participated in programs like this.

Unfortunately, it's not always that easy. Sometimes young women seeking mentorship don't even know where to start, which in my view can be largely attributed to a lack of role models and inspiration.

Take a moment and picture a CEO. Who comes to mind?

According to a 2019 survey by Plan International Canada, only 10 per cent of Canadian youth picture a woman when they think of a CEO.

This is dismaying and unsurprising. The lack of representation and role models is discouraging for young women who want to enter a certain field, but don't know who to look up to as an example of how to get there.

My time working with so many incredible, accomplished women has not only broadened my perspective as to what is possible in my future, but has also shown me the importance of working towards more representation for women and inspiration for girls everywhere.

But what might have been my biggest gain of all from this program is from a personal standpoint. I experienced what it means to be a more confident leader and person. I learned the value of making yourself heard, as well as the need to find what matters to you and running with it. On the flip side, I took away the importance of listening to others, considering their perspectives and uniting to inspire change.

My biggest takeaway was this: no matter how you go about making decisions that will impact the future, make sure young women's voices are not left out. We are here, and we are not afraid to shake the table.

Ryann Fineberg is a high school student in Toronto.

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